

Precipice

By Chris Cassidy



Blue-tongued bolts of lightning coursed through Obi-Wan Kenobi, gathering at his wrists and ankles before racing up and down his body in a journey surely designed to drive him to the edge of reason. He was held largely immobile, like an insect pinned to a cotton display swab, twitching as his muscles spasmed uncontrollably in a futile struggle to escape their torment. It was an odd sort of pain: an aching, prickling, numbness similar to a limb that had fallen asleep combined with the burning of muscles worked to shaky exhaustion. A sheen of cold sweat covered his pale face, the occasional bead of which rolled down his

temples before disappearing into his beard.

Green-blue eyes narrowed as he surveyed his surroundings, an enterprise assisted by the fact that he was suspended a meter off the ground by a series of repulsorlifts while being constantly rotated like a nerf on a spit. The crisp, acidic smell of electricity with the faint underpinning of burnt hair wafted through the air of the cavernous chamber. Under other circumstances he might have been impressed by the millions of years of slow geological evolution required to create the red rock structure serving as his prison, but currently it was just one more obstacle between him and freedom.

How long he'd been there, he could not say. Hours certainly. He was exhausted, yet wired, his mind wandering deplorably, unable to concentrate on one thing for more than a few moments at a time.

It was an effective way to secure a Jedi, he had to admit. He could focus neither mind nor body enough to harness the energy of the Force in order to affect an escape. The static electricity emanating from the containment field felt like millions of tiny nimgnats burrowing relentlessly into his flesh. It was excruciating and disturbingly efficient.

The Jedi swallowed hard, wincing at the stale, coppery taste of blood in his mouth. Dwelling on his discomfort would benefit neither himself nor the Force he had dedicated his life to serving. He sighed and tried to center his concentration. Again. Instead all he could think about was clawing the skin from his bones.

As another static-induced tremor lit up Obi-Wan's nervous system, he marveled at the *wonderful* hospitality of the Geonosians. He generally preferred to be welcomed with Corellian whiskey or even tea rather than shock treatment, but every culture had its foibles. He could only hope he was seriously running up their power bill.

He took a deep breath and released his frustration into the Force. He would wait and the Force would present him with the opportune means and time for escape. Anytime now... or now... or perhaps now... Patience was usually a skill that he had in abundance, although his own Master had long despaired that he would ever acquire it.

Qui-Gon Jinn. Dead ten years now. Grief, like the nightmares of his death, had faded in time, but the void in Obi-Wan's life never entirely diminished. Obi-Wan ruthlessly pushed the thought from his mind. Ruminating on his Master's murder was not going to assist him in his objective, which, he reminded himself sternly, was to find a way to center himself and discover a means of escape.

Right. Red walls. Check. Intense pain. Check. No aid from the Force. Check. He wanted to kick a control panel. Or a storage container. Or his astromech. He wondered how R4 was doing. He hoped the Geonosians wouldn't disintegrate her. Had the little droid been able to send his last transmission? As another series of shocks racked his already battered body, he mused that perhaps deciding to report the information gleaned during his covert foray into the Geonosian stronghold before departing the planet was not his most brilliant decision.

Many of his decisions lately had been less than stellar, he admitted, as his mind drifted inwards, unconsciously seeking refuge from the pain, until he bumped rather abruptly into the unease that had been lurking just under the surface of his consciousness since before he left the Jedi Temple on this fact-finding mission.

Someone had erased the planet of Kamino from the Jedi archives. No, not just someone. A Jedi. He had seen the evidence of it himself. His breath caught in his throat as he again considered the implications of that. A Jedi had apparently contracted with the Kaminoans ten years ago to create a clone army for the Republic, presumably to fight against the Separatists, in whose hidden base of operations he now found himself imprisoned. But a decade ago the Separatists hadn't even existed.

As Obi-Wan considered these facts, fear began to seep into his mind like water into duracrete cracks. The Galactic Republic, which had stood for a thousand years, was moving full speed ahead toward civil war. The Jedi, who had kept the peace for at least that long, were powerless to stop it. And, perhaps most frightening of all, he felt something was terribly wrong with his Padawan, the boy -- now man -- he had trained in the ways of the Jedi for the past ten years. Although he wasn't entirely sure how, his feelings told him that the fates of these three things were intricately linked. Forces were at work here on Geonosis that could destroy everything he held dear.

Anakin Skywalker was not the Padawan that Obi-Wan would have chosen for himself, which was rather ironic since he was fairly confident that his own Master would have said the same of him. But there was no question that he loved his apprentice with a fierceness that often frightened him. Still, training Anakin was a bit like dodging blaster fire, always one step away from disaster. There was no doubt that the boy was one of the most powerful Jedi ever. But the essence of the Jedi was not the power, but rather what one did with it.

A Jedi may feel anger, hate, hurt, despair -- they were, after all, sentient beings -- but a Jedi must never allow these feelings to guide his actions. Such behavior went against the instincts of most species, which was why Jedi younglings began their training so young. The ability to circumvent one's nature and to put unwavering trust in the guidance of the Force was not an easy thing to do. It was a choice that each Jedi had to make every day. Sometimes, every minute. But it was essential. Control was at the core of a Jedi. This was the lesson he feared he had utterly failed to teach Anakin.

His apprentice hadn't been ready for the responsibility of the solo mission to safeguard Senator Amidala. The fact that Anakin had apparently abandoned his mandate and was on Tatooine only served to illustrate that point. When he'd expressed his concerns to Master Yoda and Master Windu, they'd brushed him off, much to his dismay. It wasn't the first time it had happened. Lately, the Council seemed to think they knew what was best for Anakin. He felt to his bones that they were wrong. And if they were, the consequences could be catastrophic.

Don't center on your anxiety. How many times had his Master said those words to him? More times than there were stars in the galaxy. Even now in the privacy of his own mind he heard them in Qui-Gon's voice. He took a deep breath. Qui-Gon was right. Live in the moment. Focusing on his fears would accomplish nothing.

He wanted to rip the flesh from the back of his skull and stop the insidious itch! He summoned all his energy in an attempt to move his head, hoping for any type of relief, only to discover Count Dooku entering his cell.

"Traitor!" Obi-Wan called as a greeting, the bitter word escaping his lips before he'd had a chance to evaluate the situation. *Damn*, he knew better than that.



Dooku didn't seem all that offended, however. "Oh no, my friend. This is a mistake. A terrible mistake. They've gone too far. This is madness."

The appearance of the elderly human was at odds with the distress in his voice. He looked more like he was on his way to an opera, with his elegant clothing and perfectly groomed beard, than on a mission to assist a "friend" in need.

Irrationally, the fact that not a single hair on the man's gray head was out of place made Obi-Wan want to unleash a Force storm on him.

"I thought you were the leader here, Dooku," the Jedi replied, holding his voice as steady as possible. *Leader*. The thought disgusted him. Dooku had been a Jedi once. Qui-Gon's master! How could he have come to this?

"This had nothing to do with me, I assure you," the Count said, ignoring Obi-Wan's accusation. "I will petition immediately to have you set free."

While his words were reassuring enough, Obi-Wan was sickened to feel a new tingling at the corners of his consciousness. The former Jedi Master was pushing against Obi-Wan's Jedi-trained mental defenses and attempting to access his most private thoughts. He struggled against the assault, but the pain and distraction of the electric pulses still coursing through him ensured he was fighting a losing battle. In desperation, Obi-Wan sought to distract the Count with a verbal sally. "Well, I hope it doesn't take too long. I have work to do."

Dooku wasn't deterred, and sweat broke anew across Obi-Wan's brow as he tried to retreat mentally to higher ground.

Why do you run from me, my friend? Dooku's voice resounded in Obi-Wan's mind, even as he walked counter the direction Obi-Wan was being rotated by the containment field, thus forcing the Jedi to keep tabs on his tormentor's location both mentally and physically.

Dooku's slow pace spoke of an underlying arrogance and was in sharp contrast to the briskness of his invasion into Obi-Wan's mind. Obi-Wan bit back a gasp and fled, trying to set new mental barriers in his wake. He'd had other Force users in his mind before. Qui-Gon. Anakin. Even Master Yoda. But where their touches had been gentle, almost a caress, Dooku's was painful and humiliating.

"May I ask why a Jedi Knight is all the way out here on Geonosis?"

The energy currents surrounding his body increased, and Obi-Wan felt his mental footing slip. He struggled not to cry out. "I've been tracking a bounty hunter named Jango Fett. Do you know him?" His voice sounded stilted even to his own ears.

"There are no bounty hunters here that I am aware of. The Geonosians don't trust them," the count said.

But you can trust me, Obi-Wan. The words oozed into his psyche, sickening in their sincerity.

Obi-Wan tried again to flee, but Dooku's mental presence pinned him. The former Jedi Master was rooting through his memories like a Kowakian monkey-lizard scavenging through an open gut, pulling out what was useful, what could hurt him, and tossing the rest aside.

Obi-Wan's own feelings assailed him in a maelstrom of pain and loss.

The faint smell of stale floral perfume and coarse material against tiny fingers as he clung to his mother for the last time.

He mentally pressed against the memory, finally pushing it back only to feel the sweaty fingers of a fellow Jedi and childhood rival brush past his as the boy fell to his death.

Obi-Wan recoiled from the memory, and it gave Dooku the gap he needed to open the floodgates. Memories were ripped from him in a barrage of color, sound, and smell.

... red ears, face burning with the sting of a reprimand from his Master over a missed curfew...

...the weight of Qui-Gon's disappointment over a failed astronav exam...

...the light fading from Cerasi's eyes as life left her. Melida/Daan's last casualty...

... the feel of soft lips ghosting across his brow, not in promise of a deepening relationship, but in bittersweet acknowledgement of what could never be, as dictated by the Jedi Code...

... the sting of jealousy at the realization that Anakin would replace him as Qui-Gon's Padawan...

...the torture of being trapped behind an energy field, forced to watch as Qui-Gon battled a monster, knowing his Master would not survive the encounter...

...the agony of feeling the thread of their training bond dissolve as his Master became one with the Force...

... blind panic with the comprehension that the fate of a child was in his hands...

"Well, who can blame them? But he is here, I can assure you," Obi-Wan heard himself say, what felt like hours later, though in reality it must have been only a few seconds.

"It's a great pity that our paths have never crossed before, Obi-Wan. Qui-Gon always spoke very highly of you. "

Even if he wasn't ready to take another Padawan. It was an insecurity that normally no longer held any power over him. Obi-Wan knew all too well how an unwanted Padawan could grow to be as essential a part of a Jedi as any limb. But now, with his life flung around him like an overturned rubbish bin, the words seared him. Tears burned his eyes as he was lost again in the pain of a twelve-year-old child as he watched his last hope of a Master turn his back and walk away.

"I wish he were still alive." The Count sighed theatrically, and Obi-Wan heard the words, *too bad you weren't a little faster*, knife through his mind. "I could use his help right now."

"Qui-Gon Jinn would never join you." The words were a shield.

"Don't be so sure, my young Jedi. You forget that he was once my apprentice just as you were once his."

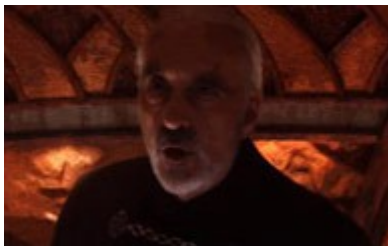
And I was his friend. This, Obi-Wan knew to be a lie. Dooku had been Qui-Gon's Master and his teacher, but he had never been his friend. It was a tactical error and the knowledge briefly empowered Obi-Wan.

"He knew all about the corruption in the Senate, but he would never have gone along with it if he had known the truth as I have," Dooku said, as he continued to circle maddeningly around his captive.

"The truth?" Obi-Wan cursed himself for the curiosity reflected in his voice. Dooku now knew intimately of his disdain toward the Senate and politicians in general and wasn't hesitating to use that knowledge against him.

"The truth..."

Dooku let the words hang there for a long moment, gathering strength, even as Obi-Wan prepared himself to disbelieve whatever came next. He could feel the Count's amusement at his efforts. *And just who do you think taught Qui-Gon that tactic?*



The words deflated Obi-Wan as the pervasive haze returned, robbing him of the tiny foothold he'd managed to garner.

"What if I told you that the Republic was now under the control of the Dark Lord of the Sith?"

"No, that's not possible. The Jedi would be aware of it," Obi-Wan said quickly, but his voice was shadowed with doubt.

Are you so sure, my young friend? An image from his memory of the star map room, the empty space just south of the Rishi Maze, bled into his mind's eye. He realized he was trembling and it was not entirely an effect of the containment field.

"The dark side of the Force has clouded their vision, my friend. Hundreds of Senators are now under the influence of a Sith Lord called Darth Sidious."

Clouded vision. His own errors in judgment. The failure of the Jedi at Antar, and dozens of other missteps that had precipitated the current crisis.

"I don't believe you." But he did.

"The Viceroy of the Trade Federation was once in league with this Darth Sidious. But he was betrayed ten years ago by the Dark Lord..."

It is not true, Obi-Wan told himself.

"... he came to me for help. He told me everything..."

It is not true. It is not true. It is not true, Obi-Wan repeated to himself, clinging stubbornly to his defiance, using the denial as a bulwark.

He could feel Dooku quashing his efforts, fogging his mind. Pressure bore down on his psyche like a vise. He twisted and struggled, but the grip only grew tighter, leaving him sluggish and confused.

The Jedi Council would not believe him, the Count continued his accusations mentally.

It is not true. It is not true. It is not true. It is not true.

The Count continued to pace, his movements becoming agitated. *I tried many times to warn them but they wouldn't listen to me.*

IT IS NOT TRUE.

But some tiny part of the Knight acknowledged that it might be. Had the Council not brushed off his concerns about his Padawan's readiness to carry out his mission with Senator Amidala? Dooku seized the flicker of doubt and exploited it mercilessly. All Obi-Wan's frustrations with the Council for ignoring his concerns crashed over him in a wave.

They see only what they want to see. They ignore your concerns. The words were coated in honey, soothing and seductive. *How many times did Qui-Gon warn you to keep your own counsel?*

It is... true. Force help him, it was true. Qui-Gon had often questioned the omnipotence of the Council. The Council had ignored his concerns about Anakin.

Dooku pounced on the admissions. *Once they sense the Dark Lord's presence, it will be too late.*

Too late. The words reverberated through him. They would be too late. The Senate was corrupt. The Council was floundering. The Republic would fall. His head spun with the implications of it all. He struggled to get air into his lungs. *What would his Master have done?*

"You must join me, Obi-Wan, and together we will destroy the Sith."

Destroy the Sith. Stop the Republic from obliterating itself. Save his Padawan. It sounded so simple. So tempting. Take matters into his own hands. Step away from the dictates of the Council and turn his back on the plethora of politics. Could he better serve the galaxy at Dooku's side?

Obi-Wan stood on a precipice, the edge of a cliff over a great yawning abyss. Pebbles gave way under his feet, their scraping against the soil representing his waning resistance. He felt emptiness open up under him as he started to fall. A voice not his own grabbed him.

The very worst time is the time you must follow the Jedi Code. Cast away your doubt. Let the Force flow through you.

Qui-Gon. He clung to those words and let the truth of them rush through him. He found his footing. The ground coalesced under him. He could breathe. Relief and the luminous energy of the Force suffused him. He chose the Light. He chose the Jedi. Just as he had thousands of times in his life. Just as he would until the end of this days.

"I will never join you, Dooku," he swore.

The Count's shoulders slumped slightly in defeat and Obi-Wan felt the tendrils of the other's man presence slither out of his mind. As Dooku turned to leave, he said, "It might be difficult to secure your release."

What Dooku failed to understand was that he already had.